Bimetallism: An Economic and Historical Analysis

This book presents a history of bimetallic monetary systems in Western economies and explains why bimetallic standards – rather than silver or gold standards – were in use from the time of Charlemagne until the nineteenth century. Professor Redish argues that token money was a necessary complement to a gold standard, but token money (a fortiori fiat money) needed technological and political expertise that were not in place until the nineteenth century. This book chronicles the difficulties of operating bimetallic standards, and the evolution of the technological and political prerequisites for the gold standard.

The simplicity of the gold standard, a monetary system where there is a fixed ratio between a weight of gold and a unit of currency, makes it an obvious focus for models of commodity money and for comparisons with today’s fiat money systems. Yet, this book shows that to understand such critical features of the gold standard as its ability to credibly anchor the monetary system, it is necessary to understand how bimetallic standards worked.

Angela Redish is Professor of Economics at the University of British Columbia in Vancouver, British Columbia. She has been published in journals such as the Journal of Economic History, Canadian Journal of Economics, Economic History Review, Explorations in Economic History, Journal of Monetary Economics, Financial History Review, Journal of Money, Credit and Banking and Oxford Economic Papers and has also published many chapters in edited collections. Professor Redish is a member of the editorial board of the Studies in Macroeconomic History series published by Cambridge University Press.
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To Anne and Ken Redish with thanks
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My interest in the operation of specie/commodity money regimes first emerged when Debbie Glassman and I tried to determine the money stock of France during the Price Revolution era. The issues that arose in our discussions have continued to intrigue me, leading me to ponder the monetary arrangements in the centuries before and after the early sixteenth century. So my first thanks go to Debbie for tangling with economic history.

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